

ADVENTURES IN SPACE AND THE WORLD OF TOMORROW

ROCKETEERS AT BAY



THRILLS INCORPORATED No. 23

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THRILLS INCORPORATED

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ROCKETEERS

AT BAY

THE man in the casket stirred and opened his eyes. Through the dim blue light of the argol lamps he could see the machinery had stopped. For a moment he lay there unmoving, looking through the crystal walls of his coffin at surroundings that were unchanged over countless eons. Outside it was a vacuum, but in the casket the air was sweet and pure.

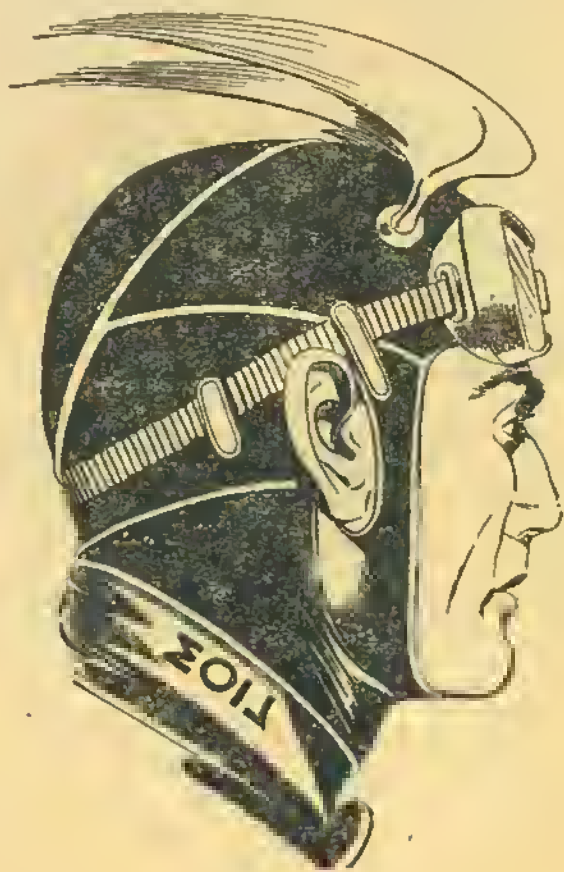
by N. K. Heming

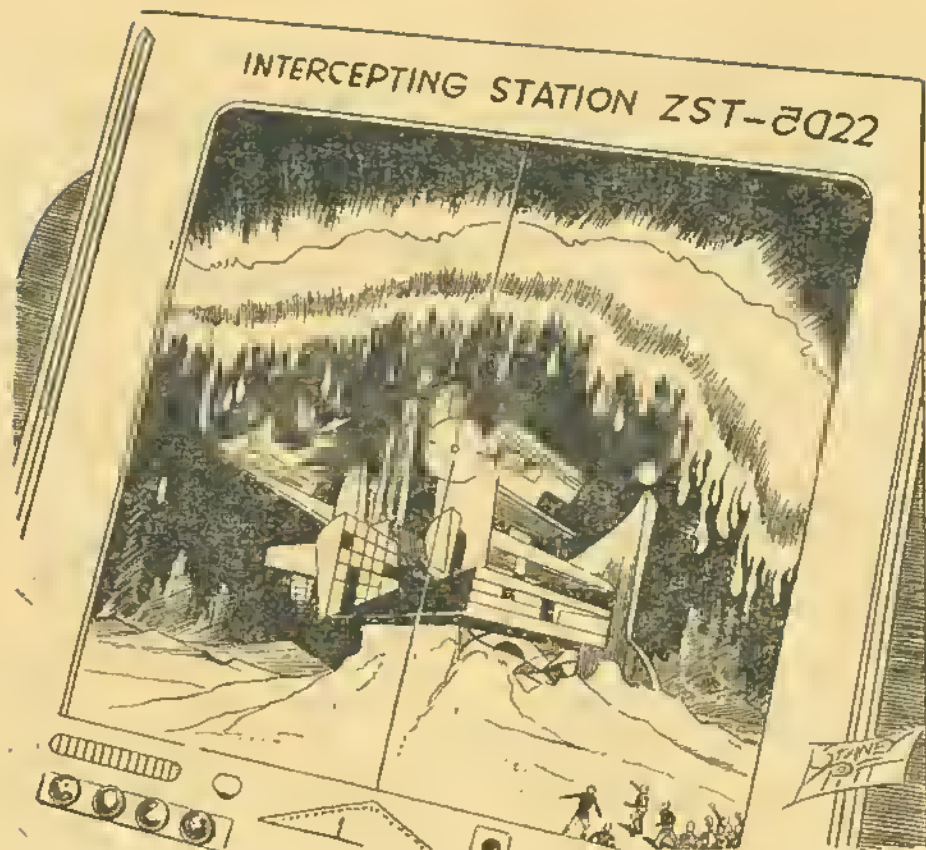
*The mist had
some way of making
weapons useless —
all weapons?*

He sent his thought to a copper lever and moved it until there was the sound of air hissing into the little room. He rose then and stood upright, stepped to the ground. For a moment he looked sombrely on the crystal of the time casket before crossing to the chair of thought. As he sat in it a panel in the opposite wall slid open and a pearly eye of light winked out at him. The thoughts of the robot were warm and welcoming as they reached out to him.

"You have stopped the machinery, Zandlor," the man sent on waves of pure thought.

"The Master Media have broken their sleep of suspended animation. It is as you thought when you constructed the time crystal, my master Vaylan," the robot replied. "They did not die."





Mallory forned into the .. screen, "I'll go inside with half- .. a-dazen men — if I am not back .. within an hour act as you think .. best."

The man leaned back in the chair and his slender hands rested lightly on the arms. "Tell me of the world since our civilisation, Zandlor. Did man also survive?"

The pearly eye grew brighter and Vaylan listened to the memories of the robot as it drew them from the great electronic brain it had charge of. Man had descended to savages for long ages, but at last he was building again and had even started to reach for the stars. The planets had been visited and stations built on the Asteroids, the bitter remains of that dangerous world exploded so long ago.

He signed then for the brain to stop and let his own thoughts roam over the world, upwards through the tons of rock that covered his underground sanctuary. It was a

strange world he saw, and for a moment a painful yearning came for his own civilisation. It must have been uncountable eons ago it had spread across the world on other lands than existed now. Science had proceeded on different lines there. It had been the mysteries of the mind that had been delved into and man had found there things stronger than machines and flying craft. At last had come the time when the eager minds of Earth had reached out to find companionship among the other planets. They had not found that companionship, but only an enemy as alien and dangerous as it was powerful. The mental war had waged for centuries, but at last Earth had seen that that other planet, spinning on its orbit between Mars and Jupiter, must win unless the last desperate step was taken. It meant their own destruction also, but, for the sake of the new civilisation that would one day follow, they had had to take it.

The great cone of force that was the result of the mental energy of

every man, woman and child upon Earth had struck deep into the heart of the enemy planet. The shock of the following explosion had rolled across the blackness of space and struck at surrounding planets. Even mighty Jupiter recoiled, Mars received his death blow—and Earth shifted on her axis. Continents went down, new lands were formed and weakened by the terrible mental force they had exerted and the shock of a planet exploding, men fought to live and descended again to savages as they did so. But Vaylan had suspected that the master Media of exploded Halcon could survive to awake some time in the far future and he had prepared before the great destruction came. Now both were awake again. . . .

* * *

GENERAL BRADBURY, Chief of Earth's Interceptor Rockets, looked up from the videograph before him. "You have your orders, Bob," he said grimly. "Get to Ceres as quickly as your ship can make it. Station ZST-5D23 is in some kind of trouble. They had only managed to get the S.O.S. signals through before they were cut off."

Bob Mallory saluted and swung out of the room. In the corridor he paused, wondering just what was going on at the Ceres station. The Interceptor Stations were spread all over the Asteroids, where their crews could pounce inwards or outwards of the system after those enterprising gentlemen who thought other people should make them rich. Of course it was possible that one of the pirates had descended on the station, but they rarely did that as there was little of value for them to lift.

He shrugged and went to get his men together for the take-off.

* * *

THE Starshell hung a couple of miles above Ceres station, officially ZST-5D23. It looked quite all right as far as the men inside the ship could see. The lights were on and the patrol ship itself rested on the launching platform—yet no reply

came to the ship's urgent radio enquiries.

"Get the men armed," Mallory threw over his shoulder to Lt. Layson. "I am taking the ship down." He glanced at his co-pilot briefly. "If anything happens, be ready to take her up again immediately."

Jackson nodded and watched in the screen as the ship dropped down and settled her squat base on the bare, rocky ground of the Asteroid. The sky outside was the eternal black of the vacuum and a short distance away the streamlined buildings of the station rose starkly, backed by an amazingly near horizon.

Mallory took his hands off the controls and frowned into the screen. "I'll go inside with half a dozen men. If I am not back within an hour act as you think best."

Jackson nodded briefly. "O.K., sir."

He watched the other man draw on the light transparent spacesuit that withstood such enormous pressures and go outside to cross the plain with the six volunteers behind him, then disappear inside the door of the station.

Mallory paused inside the airlock of the building, gun in hand, then went cautiously forward. One of the station men was visible nearby. He was dead, his face contorted with terrible agony.

The men looked white as he straightened up from his examination. "How did he die, sir?" Lt. Layton asked hesitantly.

Mallory shook his head. "I don't know. There's no sign of any sort of wound."

They went further into the building. Three men were found in the corridors, as if they had been trying to escape, willing to die in the vacuum outside rather than face the thing that had contorted their faces with such agony. In one of the sleeping compartments a man had been caught off guard and his body was found with the fingers clutching the bunk so hard his nails had dug into the soft plastic. In the central communications room were

the other five men of the station. Four of them lay in different attitudes on the floor, but the fifth was crumpled up before the radio. Like the first man, nowhere was there any sign of a wound.

Mallory looked round grimly, then switched on the radio in his helmet, contacting the ship. "Jackson, you had better send Doc. over," he ordered. "There is something here I do not understand."

"Are you all right?"

"So far—but everybody else is dead and there is no sign yet of what killed them." He switched off the radio and took a firm grip on his blaster. "A couple of you men come with me. The rest stay here. We'll take a look to see if we can find out anything."

THEY left the communications room and made their way warily along the various corridors, looking into every room. Nowhere was there the least sign of anything unusual—except for the dead men in the ship that rested peacefully on the ramp.

Yet the answer was somewhere inside the building. Before they had landed Mallory had made minute examinations of the surrounding territory—and no ship had landed. Little as he liked it, he was forced to the conclusion that it was something native to the Asteroid that had caused the trouble, and something cold grew inside him. No trouble had ever occurred before on any of the little planetoids—certainly nothing that involved a weapon like the unknown one that had killed the men of the station and the crew of the ship. And if something of the Asteroid—what could live on a bleak and airless world?

They got back to the communications room no better off than when they started. The men left there had experienced no untoward happenings, but were obviously glad to have the other half of the party back. The first thing Mallory noticed, however, were five little green stones that lay on the station captain's table.

"Where did they come from?" he asked.

The other men swung round to look at the stones. "I did not put them there," Lt. Layson answered—none of the others had either.

A cold chill ran through the room and Mallory went over to examine the things more closely. They looked like ordinary pebbles, but were a dull malevolent green.

One of the men shivered. "I . . . I can feel something funny, sir." His glance was fixed on the stones. "They are alive."

"Nonsense," said Mallory sharply. "How can stones be . . ." He broke off and recoiled. "Get out of this room. Quickly . . ."

The outlines of the stones were beginning to waver and smoke off in a heavy green mist, a mist that was rising also from other parts of the room. They backed away, firing desperately at the stuff, but still it came, great clouds of it following them into the corridors.

"It's behind us as well, sir," Layson called out desperately.

Mallory swung round and saw a great cloud of the green stuff was converging on them from the rear, and sent the fiery stab of the blaster at it. The hideous thing recoiled, but there was more of it coming up the other corridors.

"Get the ship," he threw over to Layson. "Tell them to bring the heavy stuff. We might just be able to hold out with blasters until then."

Layson complied and then asked, "What is it, sir? Have you ever seen anything like it before?"

"No," the other man replied grimly. "But whatever it is, it killed those other men." He threw them an encouraging smile. "Come on, rocketeers. We can't let a bit of gas get the better of us."

One of the blasters went out of action and the green cloud immediately converged onto the helpless man, winding itself in writhing tentacles around his head. They saw his features contort in surprised agony, but drove it back from him.

JACKSON heard the hum of the blasters as he ran out of the ship with his men, all of them armed to the teeth and towing heavier

(Continued on page 32)

RADIA RIDDLE

by
Wolfe Herscholt

MARTIN and Brenda Perry were in trouble with the Council for Education. Their son, Willis, had been handed to them from the Incubator guaranteed to be of standard AAA—and at the age of four he was rated only as AA. The Council for Education insisted that the loss of mental vitality in Willis was due to the faulty way in which they had nurtured him during his four years in the care of his parents.

The Council's decision was that Willis should go to a school for the correction of backwardness in children. Consequently, the Perrys were in disgrace among their friends,



for it was anti-social of them to have neglected their child's upbringing. Actually they hadn't been remiss at all. What they had done was to read a history of the days of the year 2000, and from it they had learned of the family relationships of old times. From it too, had grown a yearning in the couple to have such a family—a family where there was affection and respect between parents and children.

So, at the age of four, Willis Perry was enrolled in a school for the correction of backward children. Also, Martin and Brenda Perry were ordered to attend a series of lectures on child health. They were reminded again that at four years of age a boy should be able to fully grasp the Immaterial Equation. Also, he should be able to apply the equation in his play relationships.

Many other things also came from the series of lectures, until the

Perry's realised that in the four years since they had last attended such lectures, much had been changed, and much more was expected from AAA— children. So much more that Brenda gripped Martin's arm and whispered:

"It's too much, Martin. It's too much for Willis."

"Don't talk like that," whispered her husband anxiously. "If you were overheard I might be dismissed from the Parade."

For the first week Willis didn't seem to change at all. True, he could answer the questions correctly, but he didn't seem to understand the idea of the Immaterial Equation.

Then, about the middle of the second week he had been enrolled at the correction school, Willis showed an amazing grasp of the idea of matter without material. It was almost frightening to Brenda and Martin to see their small son closing his eyes, twisting up his forehead in concentration, and then slowly melting out of sight, but talking to them as he did so.

But, within two days his face was no longer torn with worry and concentration as he came to grips with the problem of disappearing into



*All they had to
do was give the
wrong answer to the
Radia Quiz . . . and
young Willis would
be sent to Eternity.*

immaterial matter, and then materialising again when he was weary of the sport.

"Oh, Martin," Brenda sighed. "Whatever possessed us to yearn for the things that are ancient?"

"I think I understand . . ." Martin said slowly, as if trying to grapple with thoughts he hardly dared think. "I believe it is something deep—something inside a man and a woman—the sort of thing that makes a bird stay with its nest, even when the danger is great. Perhaps—"

"You feel an ache somewhere—in the stomach, here?" queried his wife softly.

He nodded. There was no need for more words, for that ache made them understand. Martin reached out his hand and took that of his wife and held it firmly as he whispered:

"At least we know—at least we understand."

"I think, too, that Willis also understands," Brenda said quietly. "I think he knows what we are all losing."

But suddenly they were interrupted by an exultant cry of delight from the hall of their apartment. Together they ran out and Willis stopped short and his face became suddenly grave when he saw them. But, just a moment later he was rushing towards them, and his eyes were dancing with a feverish light.

"Mother, Father," he cried eagerly. "Look! Oh look what I have now!"

In his small hand he carried the tiny instrument with ease. On the small metal plate at the top was printed in cold words—Radio Riddle.

"No! Not that," Brenda cried, reaching a hand to snatch the thing away from her son. "That is only for AAAX children, Willis."

"But Mother, I'm AAAX now,"

cried the boy excitedly. "I was classified to-day. I knew you'd be proud of me, Mother. And you too, Father. Just watch! Do you know how to play Radia? It's easy."

"AAAX!" gasped Martin Perry, as if he had had a death sentence passed on him. "What if he forgets?"

He made another attempt to snatch the thing away from the boy, but Willis danced back away from his father, and mother and laughed his delight as he suddenly turned a small dial on the tiny black instrument in his hand. In that instant he had disappeared from their sight, and the long hall was buzzing and hissing with a myriad grouping of glowing dots, around which hissed concentric circles of hissing light.

"All you have to do is solve the riddle?" cried Willis' voice from the nothingness. "Do you see it?"

There was still the note of childish excitement in the boy's voice as the man and woman stood there, staring at the patterns being woven by the hissing circles of light. All their energy was being used to concentrate on those patterns. Somewhere in that maze was the key, the symbol which would allow them to solve the riddle. Somewhere, but where?

"Oh, but you're slow," Willis cried at them. "Do hurry. I can't wait to make it harder. Isn't it exciting, Mother?"

"Yes, Darling," Brenda replied, using that strange word she had picked up from her reading.

But there was no excitement in her voice—only the dull, fearful weight of terror! And the heavy breathing of her husband seemed to enhance that terror. It was as if their combined efforts were as nothing before the dancing, hissing circles which wove their fantastic patterns before them.

"I'll give you a hint," came Willis' impatient voice. "What is the Quotient of Immaterial X?"

"Of course," gasped Martin, perspiration dripping down over his dark glasses from his forehead. "You're at point K18."

"See!" Willis cried. "It's just like I said. It's easy. Now I'll give you a hard one . . ."

"Wait!" Brenda cried desperately. "Didn't they tell you what can happen if . . . if you make a navigational error in plotting your course back?"

Willis laughed excitedly at that. "Of course they did," he replied impatiently. "But I know all the major courses by heart, and the others are so easy to solve. Why, all you need is the equation for Immaterial Y!"

"But are you sure you remember?" asked Brenda anxiously.

"Of course! Of course I remember! I'll show you. This is a hard one," the boy's voice said quickly as he manipulated the tiny dial on the tiny instrument in his hand. He was gone, gone as he had been gone last time, and the spinning, intersecting lines and arcs of the concentric circles of light seemed to fill the whole hall till the Perry's were dizzy from trying to watch them.

For minutes on end there was silence as the couple concentrated all their efforts on seeing the key to the riddle, but although they twice thought they had found it, there came only an extra shriek of laughter when they called the answer.

"It's an AAAX riddle!" Willis cried proudly a little later.

"No!" shrilled Brenda. "No, Willis!"

"We're only AAA, your mother and I," Martin Perry tried to explain.

"We can't solve it, Son," Martin

called anxiously. "Come back. It's too hard for us."

"All right, you two babies," Willis laughed. "I told you it was hard. Here I come."

There was a pause during which the hissing of spinning lines of light seemed like thunderous noises of generators and decomposers. Then, out of the silence came a tiny voice calling unhappily: "Mother, Mother! I can't remember the equation for Immaterial Y. I can't remember!"

His voice rose in a wild, shrill scream of terror as he called on Brenda. The room was a dazzling haze of conflicting patterns. A sparkling hiss outlined the man and his wife as they tensed there, seemingly suspended in space.

"Mother!" shrilled the child's voice again. "Quickly! Oh quickly. I got it wrong!"

"I can't remember . . ." sobbed the man, doubling up suddenly as the tension became too much for his nerves. "I can't remember . . ."

Then, more terrible than all the hissing, sizzling of the spinning circles of light which had interwoven their patterns in a complex pattern of light and shade, there was silence. Silence just for a few hundredths of a second.

It was over suddenly, everything was over. Their life together, their happiness, their hopes for their son, were all finished.

They finished on one final, terrified scream from the empty air and then Willis Perry had gone. Two sobbing figures lay huddled on the floor of the Perrys' apartment. Brenda and Martin Perry had failed to solve the Radia Riddle and their son had failed to remember correctly. A navigational error and Willis Perry had spun into the unknown ether beyond the limits of recall—Gone with a scream into the nothingness where no equations applied.



MADNESS IN MERCURY

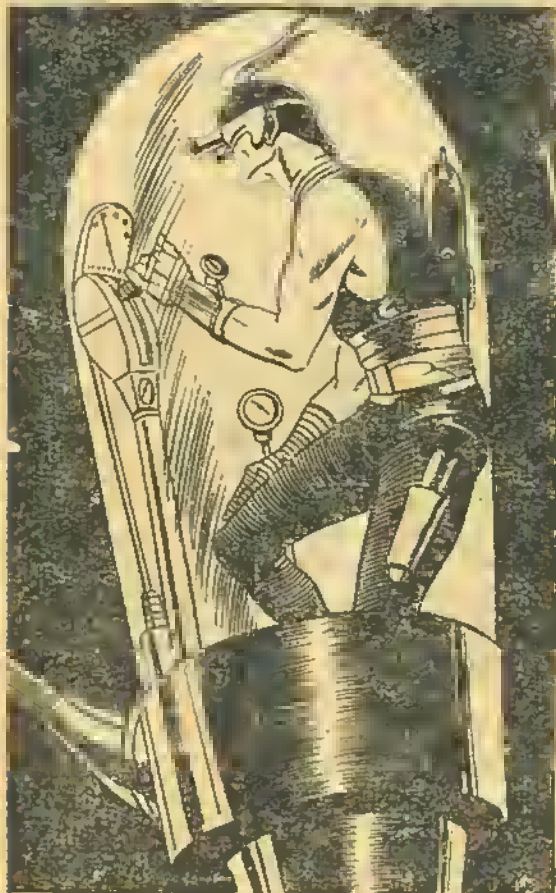
by
G. C. Bleeck

It was simply peculiar that the Earthmen and Mercurians suspected each other of war-mongering. Jay Rennart had to find out how 'simply'.

JAY RENNARD, Earthman by birth, Venusian by environment, strode restlessly around the glowing circle that was the Mercury Project, and his brain-child. A mad project, the rulers of the Earth-Venus Confederation regarded it. But desperation, and the lack of any other advance to the problem, had caused the Confederation to sanction it and to vote the enormous credits required for its execution.

The scene was weird and nightmare-like. Above, a dark sky, but

He closed his own lever . . .
a blinding flash struck the lower
portion of the leading craft
squarely in the centre.



on the far horizon a white streak of light. The specially constructed spaceship stood in the centre of the circle of light and heat sending forth the light and heat beams that made that tight circle a living oasis in a desert of death and incredible coldness on the dark side of Mereury. Already the four jet towers had been erected, ereations that looked like giant radio valves, except that from their black bases the jet-nozzle projected; the whole tower operating on a great universal joint to enable the jet to be directed at any angle.

Sooner or later those incredibly vicious Mercurians, living on the narrow strip of their planet between

the broiling heat on the side facing the sun, and the frigid iciness on the dark side, would learn of the presence of the aliens and attack. Attack they would, without doubt, with that swift ferocity typical of them. But the task Jay Rennard had set himself was not merely to repel such an attack, but to capture a Mereurian—alive! That in itself was a task verging on the impossible; and even if he succeeded in that, his real work was only beginning.

Genesh, the Venusian, and Second-in-command of the Project, approached Rennard. "The last of the jet-towers has been tested, Rennard." He waved his many-jointed arm towards the distant line of brilliance that was the horizon towards the sun. "We're more than ready for the little beasts."

"The little beasts," repeated Rennard. "That's the whole trouble, Genesh. We think of them as little beasts, they think of us as big beasts. For centuries these senseless attacks have gone on. They will go on indefinitely, costing tremendous energy and wealth and, more important, countless thousands of lives on both sides. Madness! Utter madness!"

"On their side, yes," conceded Genesh. "We've forced no quarrel on them."

"We may have, inadvertently," said Rennard. "We don't know their point of view, any more than they understand ours. I'm satisfied that once we establish communication with these people our mutual antagonism will end. They attack like crazy animals now, but they're rational beings, differing from us only in size. They have no knowledge of the Universal Spacelanguage, and no spaceradio apparently, otherwise they would surely have responded to our frequent messages."

"Unprovoked attacks on Venus—" began Genesh.

The very presence there of Earthmen and spaceships could be regarded by the Mercurians as a provocation. If Earthmen have extended

their frontiers to Venus, then may they not attempt to subjugate Mercury? That is their point of view."

"This miserable little planet with a strip of habitable country only!" said Genesh. "Now, Venus. Lush and rich," he went on with insular fervour, 'is a planet worthy of consideration. So too is your own Earth. But Mercury!"

"It's their home planet," pointed out Rennard. "Once we convince them we have no designs upon it they should be satisfied to live in peace with us, and to exchange views, to learn more about each other. That was the idea that prompted your own great linguascientist, Baresh, to devote a whole lifetime to the perfection of the Linguaprojector, and it was worth a thousand lifetimes. It's done more than spaceradio itself to weld the galaxy into a single peaceful whole."

"Yes," admitted Genesh. "But they must be willing to talk into and listen to the machine."

THE Linguaprojector was more than a mere machine. Not only did it translate the bewildering array of languages of a dozen planets into the Universal tongue—and the reverse also—but it preserved inflection, and was effective in translating meanings of uncouth onomatopoeic sounds, so that even those inhabitants of planets low on the evolutionary scale, with only the most rudimentary language, could make themselves reasonably understood.

And inside the spacecraft, waiting for the Mercurian whom the project hoped to capture, was the Linguaprojector. Waiting, perhaps, for destruction at the hands of the vicious little Mercurians; destruction of the machine and annihilation of the members of the Mercury Project . . .

"I think my idea was better," said Genesh. "We should have brought a fleet and attacked them, and then tried to reason with them. We may wait here for months. They may never learn of our presence on this desolate spot."

"You don't slaughter half a population to reason with the other half," said Rennard. "And they will come. The planet is too small for us to remain here unnoticed for long. Sooner or later one of their craft will observe us."

It was sooner than even Rennard expected. Less than an hour later they came.

It was the familiar form of attack, but familiarity had not made it less terrifying. Rennard himself took up a position in one of the jet towers as soon as his wrist-radar told him of the approach of the Mercurians. Looking through the transparent tower with his telescopic goggles he saw the craft approaching, at first like a great string of golden beads glittering above the thin line of brilliance of the far horizon. The huge shock-absorbing spring net had been automatically lifted into position at the first alarm, and that, coupled with the fact of Mercury's lesser gravitational pull, was a reasonable assurance that a Mercurian falling from a disabled craft should survive.

The queer craft were streaking across the dark sky at an almost incredible pace, a long string of spinning saucer-like craft, so close to each other that frequent collisions seemed inevitable. The great string of craft swooped and twisted like a crazy glowing snake, and at the same time the searing blue-white ray issued from the Mercurians' flame tubes as the ships hurtled on their cyclonic way towards the project.

Rennard waited until those pillars of flame were almost upon his own tower, then he barked into the intercom to the other towers the command to open fire. He closed in his own lever, and from the jet a sheet of blinding flame leapt outwards and upwards, striking the lower portion of the leading craft squarely in the centre. The other jet towers spurted to action a split-second later, and the leading four saucer-craft became at first, incandescent, and then dripping masses of spinning molten metal.

IN the white hot glare surrounding the doomed craft Rennard could distinguish the tiny figures of the Martian crews, mad with the agony of the hellish fire around them, leap from their craft. Quickly, he rapped out the order to cease fire.

The jets subsided, and the four molten craft crashed to the ground outside the perimeter of the project. The other craft continued on their cyclonic flight, veering away from the towers but still maintaining their string-like formation. The respite was temporary, as Rennard expected. With their characteristic crazy courage the line of saucer-craft again swooped on the project, and the second attack was more successful. One of the molten craft crashed into a jet tower, and the scene was lit luridly by a vast wall of flame that rose thousands of feet into the air before the jet-extinguishers from the spacecraft could come into play. A second jet tower was toppled as the white ray from a Mercurian craft burnt through its base.

But even the Mercurians retained some sense of prudence. After that second attack the craft hurtled skywards and streaked back whence they had come, leaving the glowing wreckage of ten of their armada behind them.

Rennard descended from the tower. In the spring nets outside the square formed by the towers there were several tiny bodies, but all were still. . . .

"No survivors?" asked Rennard dully as Genesh came quickly towards him.

"Two!" cried the Venusian. "Almost unharmed, except for shock. They're inside, being treated now."

Rennard's heart leapt. He ran past the group around one of the wrecked jet towers and into the spaceship, followed by the lumbering Venusian.

Two of the Medical Section of the crew had brought in the Mercurians, one of whom was conscious. They were in the big laboratory-cabin, which housed the Linguaprojector. Rennard, although prepared

by telephotos of the Mercurians, obtained during their raids on Venus, was nevertheless shocked at the sight of the mannikin standing in the middle of the big cabin. The creature was a shade over two feet in height, dark-skinned and round-faced. That such a race could be such a menace to the mighty Venus-Earth confederation was ludicrous. And yet it was a fact; a fact which became more understandable as Rennard noted the brilliant depths of the little man's eyes, betokening extraordinary energy and intelligence. This was not a member of a decadent or an unenlightened race. The Mercurian technology, as demonstrated by their incredibly swift craft, was in no sense inferior to that of Earth or Venus; and the Mercurian mentality was obviously the equal of the dwellers of other planets—at least!

THE Mercurian moved towards Rennard, and the latter blinked. The little man's speed of movement was startling. The short legs seemed to flicker, and the man's position was changed, all in the flick of an eyelid. The Mercurian's arm was raised and moved several times, apparently a gesture of anger, but the movements were so rapid that Rennard's eye could not follow them.

"Has he sooken yet?" he asked of the two Medical members.

"Not a sound," replied one of the officers.

"Oh!" Rennard stared down at the little man, who glared up at him, a concentrated hatred in the tiny bead-like eyes. The man was a perfect counterpart of an Earthman—ears, eyes, mouth; therefore it was inconceivable that speech was not the recognised means of communication. Perhaps his vocal chords had been injured in his fall into the net. "We'll try the other one," said Rennard. "He's coming to."

The other mannikin was flinging himself about in quick convulsive movements on the padded table. He sat up, or rather jerked up like

a pocket-knife snapping open. Rennard nodded, and the Medical Officer wheeled the table across to the Linguaprojector. Rennard switched on, and waited for the first words that would fall from the lips of the Mereurian.

The mannikin glared at him as his companion had glared—with tiny hate-filled eyes; but he uttered no sound. Rennard operated the controls of the Linguaprojector, while the Medical Officers took the earplugs and attempted to adjust them to the little man's skull, but the creature, his eyes now fearful, moved from the table like a streak of lightning. One moment he was sitting there, the next he was over in the far corner of the cabin. There was a flicker from the other mannikin, and then he was beside his companion, lips drawn back in a snarl, white teeth showing.

"Grab one of 'em!" shouted Rennard. "Never mind the other. They're like quicksilver!" he muttered as the Medical Officers, now assisted by Genesh, attempted to carry out the order. The little men appropriately enough were like the metal mercury in that it seemed impossible to place hands upon them. They simply melted away from the quickest movements by the Earthmen, and the sluggish movements of the Venusian were almost laughable in their ineffectiveness.

It was Rennard himself who finally caught one of the Mereurians. The little man, in attempting to escape the combined attentions of the other three men, suddenly catapulted himself in Rennard's direction, and the latter's wiry arms closed automatically around the struggling Mereurian. The energy of the creature was astounding; he seemed to be constructed of steel springs, and it required the combined efforts of the two Medical Officers and the great strength of the Venusian to overpower him.

"Good!" breathed Rennard, when the mannikin was quelled and the plugs forced into his ears. "Now

perhaps we'll get some sense—some of our sense—into his brain." He spoke into the machine, slowly and carefully, using the space-language, and confident that the brain-cells of the Mereurian would be acted upon in a manner that would translate his meaning. "We are from Earth and Venus," he said clearly. "We mean no harm to you on Mercury. We wish to live in peace with you all. Do you understand?"

There was a tense silence in the cabin, all eyes turned on the little man, held tightly in the arms of his captors. The Mereurian's expression did not change. His lips seemed to be curiously blurred, but not a sound escaped him, and not the slightest indication that he had heard or understood.

Again Rennard tried. He made adjustments to the Lingua projector, and for an hour he repeated sentences, made plans to the Mercurian—utterly without result! Sweat was pouring from his forehead as desperation seized him. "Why?" he gasped, turning to Genesh. "Why? I can't understand it! They're rational; they're like us; they're humans—virtually Earthmen on a small scale. They must talk to each other."

"The inhabitants of Flormesteen, in the Second Galaxy, communicate by means of thought-images," pointed out Genesh. "It is possible that these—"

"It isn't possible!" shouted Rennard. "Those creatures you speak of have antennae—these men have ears to hear with! They have lips and tongues; they don't differ from us, except in size. I tell you they MUST speak and hear!"

"If they want to," pointed out the Venusian. "Perhaps they do not want to. Perhaps hate of all external creatures is inherent in them. They may be conditioned from birth never to respond to reasonableness from an alien. But—the Linguaprojector has failed for the first time."

Rennard raged around the laboratory cabin. He was scarcely sane

at that moment, so crushing was the disappointment. He had had to fight, to work, to cajole the authorities of Earth-Venus to allow him to undertake this project. It had been his dream, his whole life-work, to end the age-long hostilities between Mercury and the Confederation, and he had imagined that they could be ended for all time by this simple direct method—communication and resultant understanding.

NOW, after all the preparation, after success in capturing two living Mercurians, he had failed to communicate with them.

"Calm yourself, Rennard," said the Venusian uneasily. "You've done your best—"

"What does that matter?" shouted Rennard. "Results—that's what I want!" He glared down at the little Mercurian. He bent and looked at the man's mouth. The Mercurian shrank away, his lips blurred curiously. Rennard straightened up suddenly and uttered a shout. "He's talking!" he yelled. "His lips are moving—moving so quickly we can't see them. Look at him—look!"

The mannikin's mouth was still blurred. Rennard pressed his hand against the little man's lips and it was like holding a buzzing bee in his hand. The Mercurians had been trying to communicate to them all the time.

"It's their metabolism!" cried Rennard. "They're too quick for us. Everything inside them is racing. Their voices are above the pitch of sound as we know it!" He laughed hysterically. "They can't unscramble our sounds either—too low-pitched for them! No wonder they couldn't tune in to spaceradio and understand it." He turned triumphantly on to Genesh. "Communication!" he shouted. "That's what's required. That's what I've always believed. And I'm right! There's the barrier between us and the Mercurians, a barrier that's inside each individual Mercurian, the barrier of a different metabolism. Just that, Genesh. Imagine it!

They're rational creatures. This madness, as we called it, this apparently insane impulse to attack us, and keep on attacking us, is simply ignorance of our motives in coming so close to their planet. And ignorance can be dispelled as soon as we reach their senses, break down the barrier of metabolism."

"It can be done, Rennard . . ."

"It can be done," repeated Rennard. "Simply done. Just as simple as radio waves can be brought down to the level of our own hearing . . ."

THE work on the Linguaprojector was completed by the radio technicians within a few hours. The Mercurians listened to the transformed voice of Rennard, and as they listened the hate and doubt vanished from their faces. They spoke to Rennard, their voices brought down to the range of Earthman's sense of hearing. And it was as Rennard had said. Fear had been the impulse behind those attacks. Fear of the huge creatures that were coming so close to their beloved little planet, on which they desired only to live in peace. And the Mercurians believed that they owed their continued existence only to those centuries' old hostilities in keeping at bay the Earth-Venus spaceships.

The Mercurians had their own radio, but nothing intelligible had ever been picked up from Earth or Venus—nothing intelligible to Mercurian ears . . .

One of the captured Mercurians was speaking into the radio transmitter, now modified to cope with the higher frequencies of the Mercurian speech. The little man was speaking to his own people; his lips were a blur, his voice soundless to the watching Earthmen, but the words were being listened to, in the habitable belt of Mercury. Words that were to end the centuries' old conflict between Mercury and the Confederation.

The barrier of metabolism was down at last. The madness on Mercury was ended.

SPACEMEN

by Alan Yates

**Spoofed was the
ancient word for
joke . . . and the
joke is so old we are
sure you can't have
heard it . . .**

I SLIPPED my seventh Martiani very carefully. The effect of that drink is something a little more devastating than atomic energy. The room bucked once or twice, then settled down again on more or less an even keel. I hoped the stewards would be decent enough to put me to bed after I passed out. That could be any time now from the way I felt.

Keeling was sitting opposite me, his face looked as blurred as he felt. "Wassa matter with you, anyway?" He screwed his eyes up as he glanced vaguely in my direction. "Wha's wrong with five years on Alpha Centauri? Fine place!" He giggled helplessly. "Think of all the spare time you'll have up there—with absolutely nothing to do!" He bellowed with laughter and waved his arms in the air, hopelessly, knocking over his drink as he did so. "Steward!" he bawled, "gish 'n-other drink!"

The steward padded over and righted the glass and refilled it from the bottle he was holding in his right tentacle.

"Very funny!" I said with dignity. "Ver' funny indeed! Just 'cos Space Control, rot their eyes, banish me

to the outer spaces for five years—you laugh!"

"It's all right," Keeling leered at me. "That Unit you're going to has five men an' eight women!" He giggled violently. "You won't have any spare time at all!" He hiccupped violently and nearly lost his drink again.

"Very funny!" I said again. I was looking for sympathy and I should have known better than to come into the Space Flyers' Club to look for it! "Anyway!" I told Keeling, "I wouldn't feel so bad about it if I could have stayed home for my birthday!" I looked at him sorrowfully with tears in my eyes. "My mother bakes me a cake on my birthday," I told him solemnly. "A magnificent plum cake! But what happens this time!" I banged my fist down violently on the table and saw the glass leap into the air. A tentacle snaked out, caught the glass and carefully returned it to the table—the steward wasn't going to be caught a second time. "This time," I said slowly, "I shall reach that Man-forsaken planet Alpha Centauri, on my birthday!"

Keeling slid slowly forward off his chair onto his knees. He gripped the edge of the table with a concentrated effort and managed to hold on long enough to get the last word. "All you want," he peered at me doubtfully as if to see that I was still there, "is something to gripe about!" A wide grin spread over his face as if he felt that he had triumphed and could relax now. His fingers relaxed their grip on the table-edge and he slid slowly underneath the table—out cold.

I thought it was a pity that some people couldn't hold their liquor. I got to my feet and shook my head slowly at the steward who was offering the bottle to me. I thought it was up to me, now that Keeling had passed out, to show the natives

SPOOFED



a little dignity. I took two paces forward and then Keeling seemed to leap up from the floor and hit me with his backbone.

They told me next morning that we made quite a heap under the table—with me on top of Keeling.

TWO days later they had my ship ready and I went up to the Controller to get my final clearance. The assignment I had wasn't at all bad really. Alpha Centauri Station One was experimental and the work would be extremely interesting. I was going there, and taking a small rocket-repulsion ship with me, to act as resident pilot up there. And

Quickly as I could I climbed down to the last rung of the ladder and . . . the box was still just out of reach!

Keeling had been quite right about the five men and eight women.

The Controller offered me a chair which I gratefully accepted. I still had traces of the hangover from the drinking session in the Club. "I think you're all set now, Hardy," he said. "Your ship is in perfect order and the lanes have been cleared. Once you get outside Martian gravitational pull, you can switch over onto automatic and not worry much for the next twenty days. Watch out for the meteors then. The deflector beams will throw them,

off, of course, but it's liable to be a little bumpy!"

"I'll watch it," I said.

"Another thing," he picked up a box from the floor by his desk and held it in his hands for a moment. "This has to be delivered to the Officer Commanding on Alpha Centauri. This is vital. Hardly the Controller said seriously: "Whatever happens, you must not lose this box. It contains something highly secret and it is vital that it doesn't fall into the wrong hands!"

"I'll look after it," I promised.

"Good!" He tossed the box towards me and automatically I put out my hands to catch it.

The box floated gently out of the Controller's hands and remained poised in the air about two feet above his desk. I shut my eyes, counted ten, then opened them again. The box was still there. "I don't believe it!" I muttered.

The Controller smiled. "It's true. That is one of the reasons why it is so important."

I got up from my chair and gingerly grasped the box. There was a slight tugging feeling as I pulled it towards me. It was most odd. I tucked the box firmly under my arm and left the Controller's office. Twenty minutes later I was sitting in my ship, waiting final clearance from Control.

Without thinking, I put the box down on the seat beside me. Immediately it floated upwards and remained motionless above my head—I was glad I knew I was sober. I thought the damned thing might as well stay there. I could hardly tie it down. The green lamps winked and I let in the first boost. There was the usual split second when nothing happened, then the colossal acceleration and five minutes later when I glanced out of the rear observation window, Mars was a rapidly receding red ball behind me.

I readjusted the controls and set the ship on course, then switched over to automatic. Then I had nothing to worry about for the next twenty days. I took another look at the box, it was still floating comfortably about a foot above my

head. I thought that perhaps that thing might start getting on my nerves before I reached Alpha Centauri.

I tuned in the Sonic and checked my course with Control, Mars. They told me I was on the beam O.K. and had nothing to worry about. I left the speaker on open circuit so that I would hear if anything came through. It would only be another ten hours before I lost contact altogether—complete silence then, until I picked up Alpha Centauri three weeks later.

A couple of hours later Control came through and gave me a report that the meteor belt was particularly bad, they had just had a report from an ex-Pluto freighter coming in. Well, that was the luck of the Hardys! Shortly after that I was outside the range of sonic, so I switched off and relaxed.

I had a long, long time to do nothing. There's nothing I like better than doing nothing.

I HIT the meteor belt eighteen days later.

The deflectors were working O.K., so there was nothing to worry about, but I never can get used to seeing thing hurtling towards you, then, apparently at the last moment, being diverted to one side. I watched them for a couple of hours until I got tired of it. It was certainly thick!

It was on the nineteenth day that it happened. Your brain gets a little sluggish with nothing to do. I'd even got used to that damned box floating around above my head. It happened whilst I was asleep. I woke up suddenly with the feeling that something was wrong. There was a winking purple light on the instrument panel—and that meant trouble!

Really it wasn't that bad—more nuisance value than anything else. The port rocket ejection unit had got clogged. Probably collected some dust off the deflectors. It meant stopping the ship and going out to have a look. I cut the motors and while the ship gradually slowed down I put on a space-suit and got the flexible-steel ladder ready.

When I was all set, I started the counter propulsion motors and the ship ultimately came to a standstill.

I was careful to check that the deflectors were still functioning before I did anything else. I didn't fancy being outside the ship when a meteor hit it! They were O.K. I adjusted the atmospheric stabilisation unit then slid back the door of the ship. I fixed the ladder and tossed it out so that it hung down from the door. I had one foot on the ladder when the second thing happened.

The stabilisation unit must have been fractionally out. The atmosphere inside the ship slightly lower than that outside. The difference was enough! As I put my other foot on a lower rung, that blasted box floated serenely past my head and out into Space!

I made a frantic grab at it and missed. The box floated on, down past my feet and came to rest about two feet away from the bottom of the ladder.

As quickly as I could, I climbed down to the last rung of the ladder and reached for the box. It was just out of reach. I hung onto the ladder with one hand and foot and reached again. My grasping fingers were only six inches away from the damned thing. I made a supreme effort and that was my undoing.

My weight acted on the ladder and it slowly swung away from me. I grasped nothing desperately and then lost my balance. The ladder swung out of my grasp and I floated away from it a couple of feet, collecting the box as I went past. Then the momentum was dead and I came to a stop about four feet away from the ladder and ten feet away from the ship.

I could feel the sweat pouring down my face, inside the space-helmet. I was living a space-flyer's nightmare! (As far as I was concerned I might just as well have been a million miles away from the ladder and the ship. *There was no way in which I could get back!*)

I looked at the box in my hand and swore steadily for ten minutes without, I think, repeating myself.

But that wasn't going to help me, I ultimately realised, so I shut up and tried to think.

I had enough oxygen in my helmet to last for six hours, after that I was finished! Doomed to die of asphyxiation with the ship and safety only a few feet away! I waved my arms and legs desperately, but of course it didn't make any difference—I remained exactly where I was.

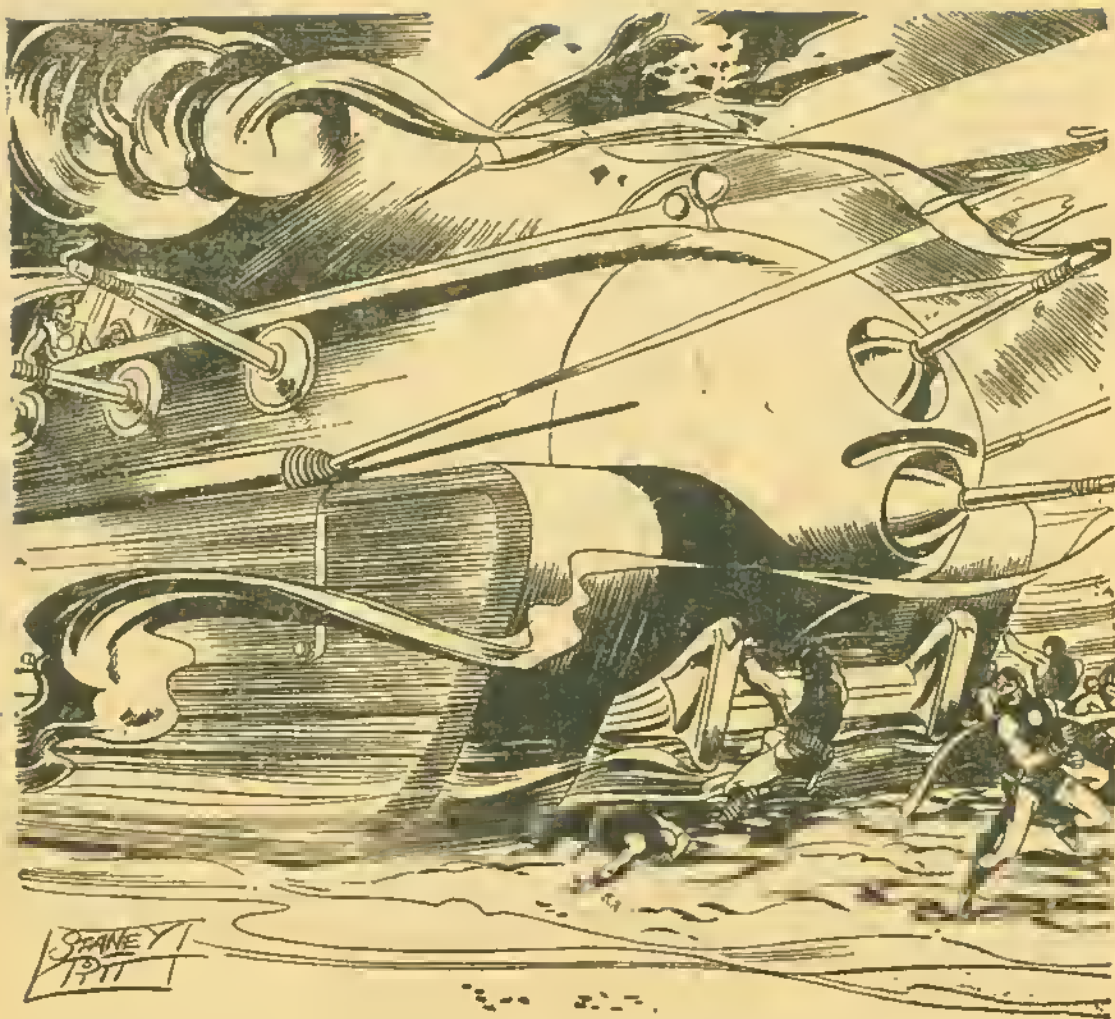
THE time moved slowly, very slowly. It must have been over an hour before I saw the faint blue light coming towards the ship at an incredible speed. A meteor! I thought that I wouldn't have to wait for the oxygen to give out—the meteor was coming straight towards me. Then I remembered I had left the deflectors working so that there wasn't a chance of the meteor coming near me.

Sure enough, when it was near, growing bigger with every split second, it suddenly whirled to one side and went screaming off at a tangent.

A moment later I was spun round, upside down, and for a few seconds I couldn't work out what had happened. When I collected my senses enough to look around—which isn't easy when you're upside down—I realised that the ship was directly beneath me. The speed and movement of the meteor had caused an eddy current which had caught me. It seemed a logical supposition. We know that space is not nothing—otherwise light rays and space ships couldn't move through it. So a moving body through space must set up a slight resistance. With that thought I began to hope again. If enough meteors came along, there was a faint chance that I might be deflected near enough to the ship to be able to get aboard once more. If I did, the rocket ejection unit could take care of itself until I reached Aloha Centauri!

Sure enough, a few seconds later another meteor appeared. I watched carefully and as the eddy caught me, I yelled excitedly as I saw I was heading straight for the ship. But

(Continued on page 34)



A moment later, the air-fighter was split through the middle by a blast . . .

"WELL, the Jago Colonization Corporation certainly know how to run a colony, and a spaceport," commented Bill Briston, Commander of the Spacefreighter, Space Eagle, one of Spacefreight Limited's vast fleet. "I've always thought the principle of leasing an entire planetoid to one company a wrong idea; but it's worked out well in this case, at least."

Barry Ronald, co-pilot and Lieutenant to Briston, shrugged. He was tall and lean, with a rather cynical cast of countenance, and his years of travel and experience as a freelance spacefreighter before he sign-

ed up with Spacefreight Ltd., had left him disillusioned and sceptical of his fellow-man, as well as of the humanoids and other sub-human and super-human creatures he had encountered. He was dubbed a pessimist by his friends and acquaintances; he insisted that he was simply a realist. He lived up to his reputation now by disagreeing with his Commander. "Looks all right on the surface," he commented drily. "Beautiful spic-and-span spaceport, surrounded by fabulously beautiful buildings, all the staff as efficient as high-grade robots—looks perfect."

Bill Briston frowned at the other's tone. "Well, what more do you want, Barry?"

"I'd like to know the living conditions here, the amount of freedom the average inhabitant possesses. But the Jago Corporation just don't

JUGGERNAUT of JAGO

by Ace Carter

The rise of Jago City had been a spectacular project — a juggernaut which took its toll in human sacrifice.

allow free access to their rich little planetoid. Why?"

"Always the same," sighed Bill Birston. "I've never known anyone to search for the dark lining like you do, Barry. The Jago Corporation are quite within their rights. They hold the lease for another ninety-six years, and it's natural that they shouldn't allow others to poke about and learn the processes their scientists have perfected. In the four years they've been exploiting this planetoid they've achieved miracles of production. We, on Earth, should be thankful that such a go-ahead corporation exists; otherwise we'd be starved for some of the rare minerals, and the spacefuel that are being produced and processed here in such quantities."

"I always distrust super-efficiency," commented Barry Ronald. "It suggests a form of slavery."

Bill Birston laughed uproariously. "You're a few thousand years behind the times, Barry. Didn't someone break the news to you that machines work for humans now?"

Barry looked down on the magnificent spaceport at the web of elevated roadways spreading smoothly

out to all parts of the only city on the planetoid, Jago City. He saw the splendid buildings, built of the peculiar white translucent stone quarried on the planetoid, rising in great tiers around the vast spaceport; and his mind switched back thousands of years to the great pyramids on Earth. . . Yes, perhaps he was living in the past; but all the same, as long as huge works were created, human hands and human brains would have to toil in their creation. And Jago City had been just too spectacular in its rise, and the Jago Corporation had amassed enormous, almost unbelievable wealth in a few short years, and the planetoid itself was closed to all who did not possess a special pass issued by the company. The fact that there existed only one spaceport, and that the uncleared portion of that little world was a sodden seamy swampland and flint-like inhospitable rocky country, made it virtually impossible for unauthorized spacecraft to land.

But it was his knowledge of the head of Jago Corporation that had caused his suspicions to become convictions.

"Yes, I'm distrustful of most things, Bill," said Barry slowly. "And I'm not happy at the thought that Jakob Stenner is the Big Boss of the Corporation. He's been mixed up in a lot of queer deals. He was exploiting the Venus fields until the Venusian Welfare Officers made things too hot for him. Had Jago been populated by an indigenous race, Earth Government would never have allowed him the charter. It was only because Earthmen were freely recruited to colonize the

place, and to return within a month before signing a year's contract if they desired, that Stenner was given the opportunity."

"Couldn't have given it to a better man," insisted Bill. "He's ruthless in lots of ways, but he gets things done." He pointed down to the spaceport. "Look at em! They're all smart, active and willing workers, well-disciplined, well-trained, and certainly well-fed." The officers of the spaceport in their trim tight-fitting uniforms, flowing cloaks, and helmets glittering in the late afternoon sunshine from Alpha Centauris all heightened the impression of a well run colony. One of them, the Port Controller, boarded the spacecraft, and Bill Briston left the observation port to meet him at the airlock. The spacecraft's papers were handed to Bill, and the craft was ready to leave, as usual, on the tick of time.

"Efficiency," remarked Bill. "If all our customers were like the Jago crowd we'd never be an hour behind in the three months' journey to Earth. We'll be home right on schedule."

FIVE hours out from Jago, however, an incident occurred which shattered this confident prediction. Both Barry and Bill were in the control room when the Chief Engineer entered and reported a stowaway.

"A stowaway!" Bill gasped. "From Jago?"

"Not so efficient at the spaceport, after all," murmured Barry, with a faint grin. "Bring him in here."

"It's a—she, sir," said the Engineer. And a moment later he ushered the girl into the control room. She was small and fair and lithe, and under the brilliant lights in the room her hair glinted like spun gold. Her skin was flawless, but there was a faint line etched in her otherwise smooth forehead, a heavy weariness in the blue eyes that hinted of past worry and sorrow. She was clad in the usual briefs and cloak worn by the dwellers on the humid little planet of moist warm days and chilly nights.

"Well, young lady," said Bill, after the Engineer had closed the door behind him. "What's the idea—and how did you manage to escape the vigilance of the Port Officials?"

She answered the second question first, speaking in an assured voice. "I took the place of some cargo. I hid in the clearing house last night."

"Why? And who are you, anyway?"

"I am Greta Maybury, Electronics Expert. And this was the only way I could get back to Earth. We're prisoners there on Jago!"

Bill gasped, looked at Barry, whose face wore a grin which plainly said, "I told you so!"

"You can't expect us to believe that fifty-odd thousand humans are prisoners back there."

"There are more than that, and they are prisoners. If they can't return to Earth, if they aren't allowed to communicate with Earth, if they work at whatever task they are given and without any choice, if every move they make is under an electronic-eye system—are they prisoners or free workers?"

"But the men at the spaceport—"

"They are a different class," put in the girl. "You don't understand. I've been there for three years and I've seen everything that has happened in that time. Jakob Stenner organised the whole thing as a slave-world from the start. He persuaded thousands of technicians, scientists, engineers—the most brilliant men he could find—to come to this grand new world. They thought there would be vast opportunities; and all we have done is build a prison for ourselves. There are thousands of others, military men now, who were of a different type, and they work directly under Jakob Stenner and keep the rest of us under control." She laughed bitterly. "The scientific and technical staff work like automatons, blindly obedient, hopeless! There is only one spaceradio station on the planet and that is controlled by the corporation. The technicians are watched too closely by the electronic eye to have a chance to build a station and communicate with Earth and reveal true

conditions on Jago. We eat and sleep under the Eye. We have set hours for entertainment, reading, teletheatre, open-air exercise—everything is perfectly arranged. We are well-fed, well-clothed, attended regularly by the Corporation's medical officers—but we're slaves. And we're all waiting for the chance to grasp freedom again!"

Bill looked from the girl to his Lieutenant. Her story carried conviction, and was an almost uncanny substantiation of what Barry had said—Efficiency plus Slavery, even if it was slavery brought up to date.

"But there must have been some protests, some revolt against such an organization?"

"There was, about a year ago. It showed us how ruthless Stenner was. It showed us—the Pugo Juggernaut."

"The what?"

"The perfect weapon for crushing any revolt, a creation of some of Stenner's top scientists and engineers. It is an irresistible atomic-driven fortress, a huge and horrible thing, bristling with guns and tubes of all sorts, atoflame throwers, atomic charges, paralysing gases. When the crowds tried to storm the Corporation's headquarters and take Stenner himself prisoner, this terrible thing, of which we knew nothing up till then, was turned loose against us, incinerating hundreds and crushing the life out of hundreds more under the tractors of the moving fortress.

"Stenner was pleased at the efficiency of his great anti-revolution machine, and in a local broadcast he referred to it as his Juggernaut, and warned us that it was standing by always ready to leap into action at a moment's notice. Just a mention of it now is sufficient to make anyone with ideas of defiance think twice."

BILL'S jaw set in a hard line.

"Stenner's had his day," he said. "We'll take you to the Director of Spacecolonies as soon as we get back to Earth, and—"

"And then there'll be the usual delay," put in the girl. "I know all

about it. It's going to take us three months to get back to Earth, and then my story will be examined closely and I'll be cross-examined to make sure that it isn't just an exaggeration by an hysterical girl. It will be at least seven or eight months before any action is taken on Jago. And in the meantime my absence will be discovered and Stenner will have ample time to prepare for a visit from a Committee of Inquiry from Earth. He's a clever and cunning man, and I know he'll have some means of putting up a front to receive an official Committee. He may use drugs on some of his workers—I don't know what his methods will be; but he'll have some plan of that nature ready. The only way to turn Jago into a decent world is to stage a successful revolt."

"But how—"

"There's just one way," said the girl calmly. "Get control of the Juggernaut!"

The two spacepilots gasped. And then, in Barry Roland's dark eyes there appeared a gleam of anticipation and recklessness. It was the sort of undertaking that appealed to him, a splendid break from the dull monotony of carting supplies back and forth across limitless space, a tame occupation for one who had spent his early years as spacepilot seeking out new worlds and probing beyond the known limits of space.

Bill Briston looked in surprise at the transformed face of his co-pilot. He had thought Barry could never recover his pristine enthusiasm, but the other's expression was now that of a youngster promised a treat. His dark face was irradiated by a huge grin, his voice excited. "Just the thing!" he said. "Turn Stenner's monster against its creator, in the old Frankenstein tradition!"

Greta Maybury looked up at the tall lieutenant in astonishment. She had not expected such a wholehearted response to her tentative suggestion. "It will be terribly risky," she said. "But I've learnt a little from one of the spaceport officials." She coloured slightly. "I—I had to pretend that I was a keen admirer of

James, and the official, a young man, got the idea that I was in love with him—"

"But you're not" put in Barry.

"Of course not! It was the only way I could obtain a little freedom. If it hadn't been for that I should never have been able to stay around the spaceport, and I shouldn't have been able to escape on to your craft. I've found out a few things, including the location of the Juggernaut. You have atomic weapons on board, and if you could surprise the guards, who will be unprepared for such an audacious move, and take over the Juggernaut, you will be actually taking over Jago!"

"A full scale civil war!" breathed Bill Briston in an awed voice. "There'll be hell to pay with Space-colonies!"

"Rot!" snapped Barry. "We'll have the testimony of thousands of Stenner's ex-slaves. . . . Forget that part of it." He turned to Greta Maybury. "Is there anywhere that you know of where we could land, apart from the spaceport, of course?"

She frowned. "It's desolate country on the far side of the planetoid. And of course you would have to land at night. There are constant aircar patrols, covering the planetoid at all times, so you wouldn't be able to use landing lights. I'm afraid you'd just have to land blindly, and risk smashing your craft. It's a terrible risk to ask you to take, I know, but there's no other way out of it."

"We can cushion our landing with jets," said Barry, with quick optimism. "Even if we smash our craft it won't make any difference, provided we don't smash ourselves as well. Because if we win out we'll have all the Jago spacecraft at our disposal. And if we don't . . ." He shrugged. "Well, our own craft wouldn't be of any use to us anyway." He looked across at his Commander's worried face. "What's it to be, Bill? Are you in it?"

"I have a duty to Spacefreight Limited, Barry—" he began.

"You have a duty to tens of thousands of fellow-humans," put in Barry, his voice chilly.

Bill flushed. "All right. But the crew—"

"I'll talk 'em round," said Barry hastily. "Leave them to me. It's up to you."

For a moment Bill Briston eyed the pleading, anxious face of Greta Maybury; then, without a word, he moved to the control panel. The steady glowing spheres of distant planets on the visiscreen began to move across the screen, and other space bodies took their place as the Space Eagle swung in a huge circle on its way back to Jago!

* * *

THE night landing on Jago was an experience that Barry would never forget. He and Bill had decided that the craft would have to risk a crash, and that the auxiliary aircar would be used to carry them across the planetoid to the spot where the Juggernaut was housed. The Space Eagle was brought to a hovering standstill thousands of miles out in space, its nose directed toward the tiny planetoid, ready for the moment when it would hurl itself like a projectile at its objective—and that moment would be judged according to the movements of the airpatrol cars that kept their unceasing vigil around the prison planetoid.

Barry sat watching the visiscreen, watching the movements of the streaking aircars, and calculating the few minutes the Space Eagle would have to effect a landing between patrols. The crew were ordered into shock harness; and at the right moment the spacecraft suddenly became a hurtling comet, streaking madly through space as thought intent on smashing itself to atoms against the globular target which grew on the visiscreen at an alarming rate.

Both the Commander and his Lieutenant were at the dual controls, acting in perfect unison, the one ready to take over in the event of a blackout overcoming the other. With the surface of the planetoid filling the visiscreen Barry threw in the jet brakes. He blacked out, recovered, as the craft, a screaming living thing, tore straight towards

the planetoid's surface, every member of the great spacecraft vibrating madly and protesting against the terrific stresses. Barry had a fleeting vision of jagged rocks below in the wan moonlight from the three distant moons. Bill Briston had slumped forward in his harness, his nerveless hands still clutching the controls. Barry swung the craft in an almost impossible small circle to avoid its reaching the other side of the planetoid in its headlong flight. The vibration became worse, and it was coupled with ominous creakings. No craft ever built had been designed to withstand such crazy manoeuvres. It tore across a rocky gorge, but the deceleration was obvious now. Lower and lower the craft circled over the inhospitable ground; Barry saw a patch of stunted trees and scrub, and widened the circle to include the vegetation; then he set the machine straight into the patch.

For a matter of a minute or so the slowly moving craft seemed to hover under the braking jets, then it tore through the low timber, smashing and burning its way for a half-mile, its interior resounding to the tearing impact; and then it stopped, rolled and pitched to a drunken angle, and Barry Ronald pitched forward in his harness, and hung limply, his nerves resting at last in black unconsciousness.

Bill Briston's face swam into Barry's vision. "Quick!" The Commander's voice was urgent, and Barry was aware of the heat within the craft. He nodded, climbed out of his harness, and left the control room. In the observation room they found Greta Maybury, unconscious. Barry lifted her from her harness and made for the airlock. He stepped out on to a heap of smouldering slag from the smashed port jet. From a great rent in the skin of the craft further aft the Engineer appeared in the white moonlight, followed by the two other members of the crew, one of whom had the first-aid kit. Greta responded to a hypo injection, and was able to stand, and almost immediately she was her brisk efficient self again.

She surveyed the terrain, then the sky. "We're roughly fifty miles east of Jago City, I should say," she remarked. "I know the landmarks well. That chain of mountains is thirty miles west of the city's outskirts." She looked quickly at the spacecraft, the aft portion of which was glowing redly. "The auxiliary aircar! You can't get it out now?"

"The hatch is well forward," corrected Bill. "We'll manage it. The armory is there too, and we don't want a spectacular explosion, either, which we will get if the heat reaches that before we clear it." He rapped out orders, and the crew moved quickly to the forward hatch with its emergency equipment, and ammunition. Greta insisted on helping, carrying blasters and ammunition and storing them in the rear of the aircar after the little craft was brought from the hatch.

THEY were almost ready to depart when a high-pitched whine caused them to look upwards. Against the night sky, glimmering palely in the moonlight, was visible one of the Jago patrol aircars, its shark-like fins and spearhead nose giving it a curiously threatening appearance. The craft swooped down, its pilot obviously attracted by the red glow from the wrecked spacecraft.

"Blasters ready," rapped the Commander. Even as he spoke a blinding gleam of light shot out from the belly of the patrol car, starkly silhouetting the tense group. "Fire!" And the six atoblasters spat forth their lethal charges as one. With cataclysmic violence the patrol car exploded in a blue-white blaze, vaporised in a boiling cloud that rolled and spread in a great sheet of radiance.

"Team work," remarked Greta calmly. "A bit more of that and Stenner will be looking for another planetoid to start a new slave organization."

Barry stared at her. The girl's calmness and brittle manner was not only astonishing, but somehow unpleasant. For once in his life the spacepilot found himself really at-

tracted by a girl, and it was ironical that she should be one who, in her manner and outlook, appeared to be more masculine than feminine, in spite of her appearance of soft beauty.

Bill Briston led the way into the aircar, and a few moments later the little craft was climbing. "The Juggernaut," said Greta, sitting close behind Bill at the controls, "is housed somewhere in the mountains. It's in the south-west spur; that was all I could discover. If you bring the car down on a plateau that faces the town—see, just below!—we'll reconnoitre from there."

Bill nodded. There was another patrol car visible in the sky to the east. It would be foolhardy to risk an engagement with the Jago craft in view of the city, the lights of which glowed brilliantly against the surrounding blackness. He caused the little craft to dip, skimming over the rocky mass below. He risked a flash of the landing lights, and sighted the comparative flatness of the plateau, and presently the craft slid to a standstill.

Greta automatically assumed command, and such was her personality that neither the Commander nor his Lieutenant disputed her orders, although Barry was conscious of intense irritation at her peculiar efficiency. Under her directions the party fanned out, climbing down the rugged sides from the plateau, searching for the wide, tell-tale track which the Juggernaut must have made through the scrub-covered ground at the base of the mountain ridge. She moved off alone, and Barry watched her go with some misgivings. In spite of her complete assurance he was reluctant to see her go alone. If she encountered one of the guards . . . He hesitated only a few moments, then he followed her. After all, she was the one most familiar with the terrain, and she was more likely to find the Juggernaut's hiding place than anyone else.

She moved with the lithe speed of a sure-footed cat over the rough flinty rocks, so that the Lieutenant had difficulty in keeping her in

sight. Several times she disappeared from his view behind clumps of rock; and it was after she had passed around one of these clumps that he lost sight of her completely.

HE stared around at the forbidding rocky desolation, and as he started to move ahead he heard a faint choking cry, so close to him that he jumped. The cry came from the direction of a jagged heap of rocks straight ahead. He moved forward quickly, the safety-switch on his blaster released.

"Who is he?" He stopped as the masculine voice asked the question. "Come on, little one, tell me his name, this lover of yours."

"I won't!" It was Greta's voice. "And you'll never find out."

"You must be madly in love with each other for you to risk coming out here," said the man. "And he must be crazy to tell you where to come."

"It's our only chance of meeting," said Greta. "You know that Stenner will not allow any love affairs between female technicians and his soldiers." Her voice became soft and caressing. "But I'm built that way that I must have someone to love me, and I fell in love with this guard, and he feels the same about me."

The man laughed. "Sure you couldn't fall in love with another guard, little one."

"Maybe I could." Greta's voice took on an intimate softness.

Barry heard a faint scuffling sound. She was playing a part with this guard, but it didn't make it any easier to listen to. He stepped forward and moved cautiously around the rocks. Under the moonlight he saw a cloaked and helmeted guard standing with his arms around Greta, the two locked in a tight embrace. The guard's face was towards Barry, and as the man lifted his face from Greta's he saw Barry, standing immobile.

The man uttered a gulp of amazement, which changed quickly to a snarl of rage at the realisation of how he had been tricked. He groped for his autopistol, at the same time

clutching at Greta's wrist and swinging her around in front of him as a shield. Barry lowered his blaster. He could not blast this man without killing Greta, but the guard could finish him off within the next few seconds!

With fascinated eyes Barry saw the dull gleam of the atopistol in the man's hand. He waited for the charge, helpless. Then the man spoke. "I don't know what crazy idea you two had to come here," he rasped. "But we're going to find out. You're planning another revolution, eh?"

Barry remained silent. "All right!" The guard jerked his helmeted head towards a black opening in the rocks behind him. "In there. You'll talk, a lot!" He turned to Greta. "As for you, you lying little—" He got no farther. Greta suddenly bent her slim young body, at the same time grasping his wrist with her free hand. Barry had a glimpse of the guard, a whirling mass of flying cloak and gleaming helmet, being tossed over Greta's bent back, and then the man's body flew over the cliffside, thudding sickeningly as it struck the jagged rocks below.

"You almost ruined things," said Greta calmly.

"I—I couldn't bear to see that big brute kissing you—" began Barry.

"Don't be silly," she said. "A means to an end. This is one of the entrances," she added. "Go and round up the others and bring them here. I'll do some preliminary exploring."

"No you won't—not alone," said Barry, and there was that in his tone that held back the hot retort on her lips.

"Very well," she said shortly. "We'll go together, but we'll have to come back for them in any case. When we see the layout inside we can formulate a plan of action."

She went into the black hole first. The tunnel was surprisingly short, little more than a lobby. Brilliant light came from a bend a few yards from the entrance, and rounding the bend they found themselves on a raised ledge overlooking an enor-

mous cavern gouged out of the mountain.

BARRY stared down at the scene below. Greta's description of the Juggernaut had prepared him for something of a mechanical marvel, but the sight of the thing took his breath away. It was fully 800 feet long and fifty feet high, and above that height again was a huge circular transparent dome. The monstrous machine was of a dully gleaming golden colour, its nose a huge bulge from which projected blaster tubes, and a slit, which the girl told him was used to expel gases, gave the thing a peculiarly animal appearance. The sheathed tractors extended the full length of the Juggernaut, and between them, like a coweatcher, was a long metal member operated by jointed arms.

There were several small buildings within the cavern, and a smaller box-like structure from which radiated masses of cables, evidently the controlling mechanism for the vast rock door through which the Juggernaut would emerge. There was a solitary soldier in that great cavern, sitting on a metal chair in the shadow of the machine.

"There'll never be a better opportunity," said Barry softly. "We'll get this thing single-handed. Greta." She nodded; and Barry led the way down a flight of steps towards the dozing soldier.

"Don't move and don't make a sound!" Barry uttered the command in a low tense voice. The soldier uttered a faint gasp, turned and found himself looking into the deadly barrel of a blaster.

"Who—" he began, but was silenced by a gesture from Barry.

"No questions. Get up, and keep your hands in the air . . . That's right. Now into the Juggernaut . . . Not a word, or you'll be an atomic cloud." The man, reading death in the cold eyes of the space-pilot, turned obediently and walked down the length of the metal monster. He stopped half-way, where a flight of steps, which were the inner side of an open door, led up into the control room of the Juggernaut. Barry

and the girl followed him. Inside the dome was a mass of controlling levers, at first bewildering, but to the highly trained space-pilot they offered only a brief problem. Keeping the soldier under the blaster Barry questioned him about some of the controls, and the man answered sullenly.

"Thanks," said Barry shortly. He frowned at the sudden look of triumph on the man's face; and at the same instant Greta uttered a cry.

"When you walked in here," grinned the man, "you set off an alarm. No one is allowed to walk into the Juggernaut during the night—not even I."

The cavern had become alive with soldiers; soldiers were issuing from the buildings and from other doors in the rocks, half-clad, unhelmeted, but all carrying blasters. Barry leapt to the switchboard, his hand groping for the door control, but the soldier leapt at the same time. His gloved fist caught the spacepilot on the jaw, sending him sprawling against Greta. The blaster fell from his hand. He made a wild grab at it as he lay on the floor, but a heavily-booted foot crushed down on his wrist, and the next moment the soldiers were pouring into the control dome.

"A spacepilot, eh?" Barry, yanked to his feet, faced the half-clad soldier, evidently the Commander of the Guards. "Another revolt, led by a pilot from Earth!" The man stepped closer. "How did you get here? What is your ship? How many are there with you?"

"I'm saying nothing," snapped Barry. "But your rotten regime is finished here," he bluffed. "Soon, all Earth will know the conditions on this planetoid."

The Commander operated a radio transmitter. "Barraeks! All troops alert. Take up revolt stations!" He repeated the message, then altered the wavelength. "Calling Mr. Stenner's Chief Secretary . . ." He spoke at some length in a low voice into the transmitter, listened for a moment, then shut off. "You're to remain here. Mr. Stenner is coming to

see you personally."

Barry saw Greta's face turn ashen at the sound of the man's name. All her brittle confidence seemed to desert her. They were standing side by side, and his hands sought hers and she responded by squeezing his hand tightly.

SOMETHING of Greta's awe communicated itself to Barry when, in a surprisingly short space of time, Jakob Stenner strode into the control dome. Barry felt a thrill at the first sight of this legendary figure, a thrill of revulsion tinged with respect. Stenner was small, stunted, with an enormous bald head and deep-set green eyes. He was clad sombrely in dark well-cut briefs and a black cloak. With him was his Chief Secretary, a tall hawk-faced man.

"You've done well to get this far," was Stenner's surprising comment. "You can do better for yourself. I admire men of initiative. I'm offering you work with me."

"I'm not—"

"You two are holding hands," went on Stenner smilingly. "As an inducement to you I shall waive my rule that my staff may not marry. There is a romantic attachment between you two? Interested?"

"Not in your proposition," said Barry.

"I don't make an offer twice. Think carefully."

A soldier entered the dome and saluted the Commander. "An air ear has been located, sir. Three space-fliers have been found, members of a spacefreight crew. All have been destroyed."

Greta uttered a gasp and gripped Barry's hand tighter.

"Hopeless, you see," said Stenner. Barry was not listening. His thoughts were bitter. There were two soldiers at the entrance to the dome, the Commander, Stenner and the Secretary. Just a few men to prevent his gaining control of the Juggernaut, and with it virtual control of this planetoid. He'd reached the very brink of success, and was halted abruptly at the last moment. The crew were dead. Bill Briston? Ap-

parently he had eluded capture so far, but it could only be a matter of time.

"I want your answer now." Stenner broke in on his thoughts.

Barry hesitated. If he could play for time—Then he, and the others, spun round sharply to stare through the dome as a series of explosions suddenly split the silence, echoing again and again through the vast cavern. "It's Bill!" he yelled. And Bill Briston it was. He was standing on the little platform by which Barry had entered the cavern, a blaster in his hand spitting death and devastation on the massed soldiers below. As he watched the Space Commander ducked back into the tunnel and the soldiers responded with a burst of atomic fire that split and melted the rock. Then Bill reappeared again, his back to them; and with a sickening feeling of despair Barry realised that his Commander was caught between two fires, that soldiers were attacking him from the tunnel as well.

He saw Bill turn sharply and discharge his blaster into the cavern, and the next instant Bill Briston vanished in a boiling atomic cloud!

Stenner chuckled as he peered through the glastic dome. "I told you it was hopeless—"

Barry leapt. Leapt straight at the dwarfish figure and grasped Stenner around the waist with one arm and gripped his neck with his free hand. He backed towards the control panel, using Stenner's writhing body as a shield. The soldiers, their blasters raised, moved towards him.

"Back!" roared Barry. "Tell 'em to get back, Stenner, or by hell! I'll throttle you. Tell 'em to get out, all of them!"

Gasping, as the grip on his throat slackened, Stenner gave the order. The soldiers backed out, the Commander, after a helpless stare at Stenner, followed them, but the Secretary made no move.

"You too!" snapped Barry. "Greta, operate that door-control, the red button, as soon as they're clear." The Secretary moved slowly towards the door. Through the glastic Barry saw the soldiers and the

Commander on the steps. "Hurry, you," he urged.

The Secretary's response was a tigerish leap at Greta. The girl uttered a cry, and involuntarily stabbed at the red button, and then she crashed to the floor under the weight of the tall Secretary. The man leapt to his feet at once, and from beneath his cloak he whipped out a tiny atom-flame pistol. With every ounce of strength in his sinewy body Barry hurled the slight body of Stenner at the Secretary; then he rushed to the control board, closed the main switch. The huge machine vibrated to life, the vibrations increasing as relay after relay closed automatically. There was a rending crash, muffled within the machine, but like a distant avalanche, as the Juggernaut crashed through the rock door, and began racing irresistibly across the rugged ground, its speed increasing at every moment.

Within the control dome Barry had a glimpse of the dawn sky above and fleeting countryside below as he hurled himself at Stenner and the Secretary. The latter's pistol had shot from his hand but Barry had no time to look for it. The tall man, twisting clear of Stenner, was on his feet, and as Barry rushed him he shot out his foot and pain ripped through the spaceflier as the vicious kick caught him in the stomach. He dropped to the floor, but Greta flung herself like a tigress at the tall Secretary. The man uttered a shrill cry as she caught his wrist and twisted it, at the same time bending her lithe young body sharply. The Secretary hurtled across her back and crashed against the glastic, slid to the floor, where he lay unconscious, blood seeping from his split head.

The Juggernaut was hurtling along at terrific speed. Through the glastic dome Barry saw massive buildings flying past as the vast machine thundered into the City itself. Masses of soldiers, alerted and at their revolt stations, broke and fled as the crazy machine tore amongst them, crushing them to rags and red pulp. There came a jarring impact as the Juggernaut cut through a great building, like a knife

through butter, and masonry crashed around the machine.

Barry laughed crazily. This was the ultimate adventure of an adventurous career. "You lunatic!" It was Stenner who spoke, his green eyes blazing, fear in his face. He stared up, and Barry saw vicious pointed-nosed fighters converging on the machine. The nearest fighter sent out a blinding jet of fire which narrowly missed the only vulnerable part of the Juggernaut. The glastic sprang to the gun-control panel, and a moment later the fighter was split through the middle by a blast from the gun.

"They don't know you're still alive, Stenner," said Barry. "You'd better broadcast to the City. Call on your men to surrender. Call on your slave-workers to take over all arms. It's that, or I'll wipe the city out and I'll finish you off first."

"And if I do," snapped Stenner,

"what happens to me?"

"To save loss of life I'll guarantee your freedom. You can take a spacecraft and a crew—and the universe is a big place."

Stenner stood irresolute for a moment; then he nodded. "Yes," he said philosophically, "the universe is a big place." He moved over to the broadcasting unit, and spoke . . .

* * *

With the Juggernaut at rest among the ruins it had created Barry and Greta stood in the dome watching the spaceship until it became at one with the black vastness of space. "The last of Stenner, I hope," he said. "Ruthless, but you can't help admiring him in a way. You know, Greta, Stenner is about the last person I should have imagined as Cupid, but he did just that little job for us—or did he?"

Greta's reply was to move into Barry's arms.

Rocketeers at Bay (Cont'd)

equipment behind them. They covered the ground in great leaps in the slight gravity, but they were only halfway there before another sound sent them round in aghast horror. It was the roar of exploding atomic reaction engines—the engines of the Starshell.

"What . . . ?" someone said.

"Lord knows," Jackson retorted sharply. "Whatever it is they are fighting inside, it has somehow managed to blow up the ship to stop us getting away."

In the building they also heard the explosion, but it did not register on them. They were too busy trying to stay alive, a hopeless battle. Blaster after blaster was failing now and the green cloud was closing in. They knew it was alive now. There was something like a greedy anticipation in the air.

Man after man choked and fell to the floor, writhing under the stuff.

There was no defence. For a short while the blasters could keep it back, but it had some way of putting the weapons out of commission. Could it do that to all weapons? A cold chill gripped them even in their agony as they thought of the green terror overrunning a whole world that had no defence.

Then something happened. The mist writhed and they could almost sense its baulked fury and fear. Something had come into the building to frighten the green mist, something invisible to them but tangible to the mist.

* * *

VAYLAN saw with his mind the battle on the Asteroid the new civilisation called Ceres and with anger noted the men writhing on the floor under their ancient enemy the Media. He sent his thought on

and heard the Media speak among themselves.

"These descendants of the old ones are puny creatures with no knowledge of the mind's power."

"Their world will be easy to take. When the old ones destroyed our planet they also destroyed their race. They died, but we still live."

"They did not all die." The green cloud writhed as the thought of Vaylan pierced into it. "You are weak after your long sleep," he continued. "I gained strength as I slept and now I shall destroy you."

* * *

MALLORY came to with the rest of his men on Station ZST-5D22 on the Asteroid Juna. The whole place was agog. Nobody knew how they had got there. Somebody opened the commonroom door—and there were the crew of the Starshell scattered about the floor and furniture—with no more knowledge of how they had arrived than their surprised hosts.

"The last think I remember is the green was writhing away, and ordering everyone outside," Mallory said bewilderedly.

The station captain shook his head. "There has been something going on at Ceres that I do not understand. Come with me to the communications room and I'll show you." When they had both reached that room he slipped a cube recording into a player-screen. "We had been watching Ceres ever since you landed and this recording was taken."

In amazed disbelief Mallory looked into the screen and saw himself and his men run from the building—then a great twisting, flaming thing of force come into being in the sky. It descended, nearer and nearer to the building, and the screen went blank in a brilliant burst of light.

"What was it?" he asked blankly. The captain shook his head. "I

think that is something we shall never know, nor how you got here. From your report, you fought an unknown force on Ceres and something helped you—transporting you here when your ship was destroyed."

Mallory swayed slightly. What had the green stuff been? And what had frightened it? Powerful forces had been at work on Ceres, forces they knew nothing of. It would be a long time before they understood—if ever.

VAYLAN kept the Media chained with his thought as the great flaming snake of force he had brought into being descended, then as the struggles of the captive things ended, he relaxed and let his thought join his body back on Earth.

"The Media are no more, master," the robot Zandlor said. "Do you go aboveground to greet your descendants now?"

"No, Zantlor," Vaylan said softly. "They are not yet ready and would not understand. They must have their mechanical civilisation before they can begin to delve into and appreciate the far greater powers of the mind."

The robot watched the man lay down again in the crystal casket. "It has been so long without you, master," it said pleadingly.

Vaylan smiled. "Patience, my good friend. It will not be for long now. They learn quickly. Soon they will be ready for the knowledge we can bring them."

There was the quiet thought of goodbye from the robot and the panel closed over the pearly eye of the faithful little metal creature that stood in front of the great electronic brain. The air hissed out of the room as the copper lever swung back to its former position and current flamed in great arcs about the crystal coffin of the man who lay sleeping until the descendants of his lost civilisation should be ready for him.

SPACEMEN SPOOFED (Cont'd)

I'd forgotten the deflectors—I was just another moving body to them! Just as I was nearing the ship, a violent eddy caught me and sent me spinning to one side—I had been deflected!

And so it went on for a couple of hours. I was buffeted about from one side to the other of the ship, but never near enough to grab hold of it.

When I had given up all hope, and was soberly thinking that there couldn't be a sillier way of dying, a freak happened that saved my life. Two meteors came at the ship almost simultaneously. The first eddy took me over the ship so that I was once more behind it, and the second meteor being diverted in the opposite direction, sent me forward again, towards the rear of the ship. The deflectors only acted forward from the ship, so I drifted in easily toward the ladder and managed to catch hold of the bottom rung with one hand.

I sobbed with relief as I climbed through the doorway and pulled the ladder in after me. My head was beginning to feel fuzzy and I realised that the oxygen was giving out. As quickly as I could, I shut the door and sealed it, then let the box go, and it floated back towards its original place as if nothing had happened! I adjusted the stabilisation unit and managed to get the helmet off as the oxygen gave out entirely.

I didn't worry about the rocket ejection unit. It made my progress a little slower but I wasn't worrying about that. I had no intention of venturing outside the ship again until I had safely delivered the box!

I was given a warm welcome when I reached Alpha Centauri—especially by the women! First thing after I landed I went to the Controller and handed him the box.

"Here!" I said. "Take it quickly, it's caused me enough trouble already!"

He raised his eyebrows. "What is it?" he asked.

"Don't tell me you don't know!" I yelled. He shook his head with a puzzled frown. I couldn't stand it any longer. I opened the box as quickly as I could. When the packing and wrappings finally came off, there stood revealed on the table, in all its pristine glory—a plum cake!

There was a small white card inside which said: "Happy birthday! Hope you don't feel lonely now.—Keeling."

The Controller frowned at me. "Really, Hardy!" he said tartly. "I hope you don't usually use that sort of language!"

A COUPLE of years later, Keeling came in on one of the freighter units that came up every six months (Terra reckoning). He screamed with laughter when I told him the story of the box—the cretin! "I remembered our conversation in the club," he said. "I had one of the Martians bake the cake, and the Controller agreed to give you the box and spin the story that it was something extremely valuable!"

"One thing you might tell me," I said patiently. "How the hell did you get it to float?"

"Well, old boy," he looked at me solemnly. "You know the hallmark of a good cook? It's the lightness of his cooking. That Martian was such a hell of a good cook that he couldn't help it. That cake was so damned light it just couldn't help floating. Oh! Ho! Ho! Haa—Ha-agh!"

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